

European
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

Prime Minister Simon Harris' Fine Gael is the favourite in Ireland's snap general election

On 6 November, the Taoiseach (name of the Prime Minister in Ireland) Simon Harris (Fine Gael, FG, Clan of Gaels) declared that he would request the dissolution of Dail Eireann, the lower house of Parliament. On 8 November, Irish President Michael D. Higgins signed the call for a snap general election to be held on 29 November. Approximately 3.6 million Irish people will be called to the ballot box to elect their 174 MPs.

Fine Gael's better-than-expected results in the European and local elections on 7 June (29.6% and 23% of the vote respectively, i.e. first place in each poll) and the possibility of taking advantage of the weakness of the main opposition party, Sinn Fein (FF, (We) Ourselves), prompted Simon Harris to bring forward the general election. In addition, the Taoiseach can rely on a significant upturn in his popularity rating, which has risen by 17 points since he took office last April, reaching 55% in September.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by Opinions for the Sunday Times and published on 16 November, Fine Gael is expected to come out ahead in the general election with 25% of the vote. Fianna Fail (FF, Soldiers of Destiny), led by Michael Martin, outgoing Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defence, is expected to win 20% of the vote, ahead of Sinn Fein, the radical left-wing party led by Mary Lou McDonald, with 18%. The Social Democrats, led by Holly Cairns, would follow with 6%; the Labour Party, led by Ivana Bacik, and Roderic O'Gorman's Green Party (GP), 4% each. Solidarity, Our Lives Before Profits (S-PBP) and Aontu, Peadar Toibin's party, are expected to win 2% each.

The independents are set to win a fifth of the vote (21%).

These figures should be interpreted with caution, as recent elections in Ireland have shown that the electorate is highly volatile.

Following the last general election on 8 February 2020, which was dominated by Sinn Fein, Fine Gael, which came third, and Fianna Fail agreed to share power by rotating the parties in the post of Taoiseach. Michael Martin was appointed in June 2020 and held the post until December 2022, when he was replaced by Leo Varadkar (FG). Varadkar handed over to Simon Harris last April. The Green Party was the partner of these two traditional political parties in the current coalition government.

According to the latest opinion poll on the election campaign, the main concern of the Irish people is the cost of living (30%). This is followed by health (18%), housing (17%), immigration (9%) and global warming (4%).

The election campaign, which will be very short-lived...

The Dail Eireann, elected on 29 November, will meet for the first time on 18 December.

FINE GAEL IS BEST PLACED

Fine Gael, which has been in power in Ireland since 2011, is the favourite to win the election. Taoiseach Simon Harris, who has really revived the party since

coming to power six months ago, is highlighting the record of the outgoing coalition government, which has taken Ireland a long way and managed the country well as it faced up to the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ensuing conflict. *'We did not agree on everything, but we worked well together'*, said the Prime Minister, adding *"I am fully aware that this country and the European Union could suffer a transatlantic trade shock"* in reference to the election of Donald Trump as the next President of the United States, announced as the campaign was underway.

Housing and immigration are the two key issues for Fine Gael over the next five years. It is committed to building new homes and better regulating the rental market.

Although there are still problems such as the high cost of housing and the lack of resources for public services, Simon Harris highlights the efforts made to clean up public finances. *'We've been able to save and my children will never have to go through what we went through, which was the experience of austerity'*.

The financial crisis that began in 2008 was triggered by the bursting of a property bubble fuelled by excessive lending by banks. Several major Irish banks suffered huge losses, forcing the government to guarantee bank debts, a decision that placed a heavy burden on public finances. In 2010, Ireland obtained an €85 billion loan from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in exchange for tough economic reforms. The 2008 crisis triggered a deep recession, high unemployment and austerity measures. It took Ireland several years to recover economically, but the social and financial consequences lasted well beyond the crisis.

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Fine Gael and Fianna Fail are hunting on the same ground. The Taoiseach has pledged never to cooperate with Sinn Fein. Micheal Martin, leader of Fianna Fail, has also ruled out any collaboration with Mary Lou McDonald's party. *'It's clear they don't understand our business model. They don't understand the business model, they don't believe in free trade. They didn't support the implementation of the trade agreement between Canada and the European Union, which is indicative of their attitude to the economy, which shows a disconnect.'*

Like Simon Harris, Michael Martin highlighted the achievements of the outgoing coalition government since 2020 and its *'ability to lead the country through very difficult times'*. *'The greatest danger to the Irish economy comes from the outside and we need the experience of leadership that has already demonstrated its capacity to deal with significant events and shocks to steer us through the next five years which are going to be a real challenge, particularly economically'*.

SINN FEIN, A STRUGGLING OPPOSITION

Sinn Fein came out ahead in the general election on 8 February 2020, but was criticised for its electoral strategy, in particular for not fielding a sufficient number of candidates. This year, it was criticised for fielding too many in the local elections on 7 June. *'We are fielding around 70 candidates and we are in it to*

win it. When we say we want a change of government, [...] we're in it to win it,' said Mary Lou McDonald.

However, Sinn Fein has suffered a significant decline in support. A year ago, the party looked set to prevent Fine Gael from securing a fourth term in office, with over 30% of the vote. Since last June, the figures have been falling while Fine Gael's have been rising. Sinn Fein has experienced some internal tensions and several controversies surrounding issues that were kept secret and then considered to be poorly handled by many party members.

In addition, Sinn Fein is caught between its traditional constituency of working-class people who are concerned about the number of immigrants coming into the country, and some younger and middle-class supporters who are less concerned. The two groups have different priorities. Divided, Sinn Fein is losing support in both groups.

Mary Lou McDonald admitted that recent mistakes had affected her party and said that Sinn Fein was committed to winning back its working-class base during the election campaign.

'On election day, the whole political debate will crystallise around a very simple choice: Either more of the same, a government again led by Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, or, for the first time, a government led by Sinn Fein (...) Those who have held the reins of power for a century think that these elections are a foregone conclusion, that they will have everything they want again and that they will simply return to the government buildings they left', adding *"But the Irish people have a say in this"*.

THE IRISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Oireachtas (parliament) is bicameral. It comprises the Dail Eireann (House of Representatives) elected for 5-year terms.

Population growth in Ireland, which has now a population of 5.1 million (according to the 2022 census), has meant that the number of members

of Dail Eireann has had to be increased (from a minimum of 171 to a maximum of 181). Article 16.6.2 of the Irish Constitution stipulates that a Member of Parliament must be elected by at least 20,000 and a maximum of 30,000 inhabitants. In August 2023, the Electoral Commission proposed that the Dail Eireann, which had previously had 160 elected members, should now have 174, spread across 43 constituencies rather than 39, an increase of 14 MPs and 4 constituencies. This means that the absolute majority in Dail Eireann is now 88 MPs.

Each constituency appoints 3, 4 or 5 deputies. They are elected by proportional representation using the single transferable vote system. Voters choose from a list of candidates the one(s) they wish to vote for in order of preference. The number 1 is placed in front of the candidate with the highest preference and then, if desired, 2, 3, 4, etc. in front of the names of the other candidates on the list. The calculation of the electoral quotient, i.e. the minimum number of votes that a candidate must obtain to be elected, is the first operation in the counting process. This quotient corresponds to the total number of votes cast divided by the number of seats to be filled (3, 4 or 5 depending on the constituency) plus one. Any candidate who receives this number of votes is elected. Any votes in excess of this number are then distributed among the second-preference candidates.

The Irish are so attached to their voting system, which they share with only two other countries in the world (Malta and Australia), that they have twice (1959 and 1968) refused to allow it to be changed. The single transferable vote was written into the Irish Constitution in 1937, and can only be changed or abandoned by referendum. Although the single transferable vote system enables the political parties to be faithfully represented, it is sometimes criticised for the strong competition it generates between candidates from the same party. MPs sometimes regret that this voting system forces them to devote a great deal of time to the individual requests of their fellow citizens and prevents them from concentrating on national political issues.

General elections in Ireland

29th November 2024

A law passed in 2012 obliges political parties to field at least 40% women in general elections, failing which their state funding will be cut by 50%. This year, the country has the highest number of women candidates (248 out of a total of 685 candidates, i.e. 36.2%), an increase of 53% compared to the previous ballot on 8 February 2020.

The Seanad Éireann, the upper house of Parliament, comprises 60 members, 43 of whom are elected by proportional representation (using the single ballot system) by 5 large bodies made up of members of parliament (outgoing senators and newly elected MPs) and local elected representatives (county councillors and county town councillors) representing various sectors of society (culture, education, agriculture, labour, industry, commerce and public administration). 11 members of Seanad Éireann are appointed by the Prime Minister and 6 by citizens on the electoral roll who have obtained a 3rd year degree from the National University of Ireland or the University of Dublin (Trinity College). The Seanad Éireann, which will not be dissolved before the election of the new House, is traditionally elected no later than 90 days after the Dáil Éireann.

The Irish government may comprise up to 15 members. Of these, 2 may be members of the Seanad Éireann, while all the others must be Members of Parliament.

9 political parties are represented in the current Dáil Éireann:

- Sinn Féin (SF) is unique in that it exists (and participates in elections) in two European

states: Ireland and the United Kingdom. A radical left-wing nationalist party led by Mary Lou McDonald, it has 37 seats;

- Fine Gael (FG), the centre-right party of outgoing Prime Minister Simon Harris, was formed in 1933 and has 37 elected members;
- Fianna Fáil (FF), a right-wing party founded in 1926 and led by Michael Martin, has 35 seats;
- The Green Party (GP), led by Roderic O'Gorman, has 12 seats;
- The Labour Party, founded in 1912 and led by Ivana Bacik, has 6 seats;
- The Social Democrats, founded in 2015 and led by Holly Cairns, have 6 MPs;
- Solidarity. Our Lives Before Their Profits (S-PBP) (collegiate leadership), a radical left party, has 5 seats;
- Aontu, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland party formed from a split from Sinn Féin, created in 2019 by Peadar Kirby, who has led it ever since. The party is economically positioned on the left of the political spectrum but on the right when it comes to social issues, and has 1 elected member;
- Independents for Change, a radical left-wing party, has 1 seat.

Finally, Dáil Éireann has 19 independent MPs.

The Irish elect their President by direct universal suffrage. However, the President only has representational powers. He is elected every 7 years and can only be re-elected once. The current head of state, Michael D. Higgins, has been in office since 27 October 2011. He was re-elected as Ireland's leader with 55.81% of the vote on 26 October 2018.

Results of the general election in Ireland on 8 February 2020

Turnout: 62.71 %

Political Parties	Number of votes (first preference vote)	% of votes cast (first preference votes)	Number of seats
Sinn Fein (SF)	535 595	24.50	37
Fianna Fail (FF)	484 315	22.20	37
Fine Gael (FG)	455 568	20.90	35
Green Party (CG)	155 695	7.10	12
Labour Party (Lab)	95 582	4.40	6
Social-Democrats (SD)	63 397	2.90	6
Solidarity-Our life before their profit (S-PBP)	57 420	2.60	5
Aontu	41 575	1.90	1
Independents for Change	8 421	0.40	1
Independents	266 353	12.20	19
Others	19 890	0.90	0

Source : [2020-05-01_33rd-dail-general-election-results_en.pdf](#)

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